

ORIENTALISM, ASSYRIOLOGY AND THE BIBLE

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IMAGES OF ASSYRIA IN NINETEENTH- AND
TWENTIETH-CENTURY WESTERN SCHOLARSHIP*

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Until the late eighteenth century, Western views of ancient history relied exclusively on two groups of sources: the Bible and the literature of the classical world. Both groups had their central topographical reference points: the first one Jerusalem, the second one Athens and Rome. The people of the Middle Ages and early modernity did not conceive of these cities as distant places of a remote and alien past. They regarded them instead as locations of crucial importance for their self-representation: from Jerusalem, their religious beliefs had arisen, from Athens their methods of thinking, and from Rome their political organization. The ancient civilizations outside this familiar sphere were not completely unknown, since cities such as Nineveh, Babylon, or Carthage appeared in biblical and classical texts as well. But they represented a kind of counter-world to that shaped by Judeo-Christian and classical traditions. While Israel, Greece and Rome served as models of identity for the West, Assyria, Babylonia, and Phoenicia were the corresponding embodiments of alterity. The tone was set by the Bible: Babylon was 'the mother of whores and of every obscenity on earth' (Rev. 17.5), and Nineveh 'the bloody city, all full of lies and booty' (Nah. 3.1).¹

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1. Of course, this statement simplifies what was in fact a somewhat more complex reception of ancient history. Besides disgust, the pre-modern Western world occasionally also showed a certain degree of admiration for the ancient nations of the East. Egypt represents a particularly ambivalent case—thoroughly investigated by Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*. I: *The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785–1985* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987). On the one hand, it was the land where a despicable pharaoh had enslaved and humiliated the Israelites. But several Greek authors, most famously Plato, as well as later European scholars such as John Spencer (1630–93) and William Warburton (1682–1759), whose books have recently been discussed by Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 55–143, regarded Egypt as a cradle of ancient wisdom. For other European scholars of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Persia was the major source of such *prisca sapientia*: see, for example, Jacques Gaffarel, *Unheard-of Curiosities Concerning the Talisman-*

By the second half of the nineteenth century, this situation had quite dramatically changed. Convenient historical stereotypes that, thanks to the absence of original sources, had never been challenged, came suddenly under attack, and the clear boundaries between 'us' and 'them' became blurred. The resulting confusion is addressed in a famous passage from Friedrich Nietzsche's 'Thus Spake Zarathustra.' In a chapter about 'the land of culture' ('Vom Lande der Bildung'), the German philosopher describes his contemporaries, the 'present-day men', as follows:

With fifty patches painted on faces and limbs—so sat ye there to mine astonishment, ye present-day men! And with fifty mirrors around you, which flattered your play of colors, and repeated it! Verily, ye could wear no better masks, ye present-day men, than your own faces! Who could—*recognize* you! Written all over with the characters of the past, and these characters also penciled over with new characters—thus have ye concealed yourselves well from all decipherers! ... All times and peoples gaze divers-colored out of your veils; all customs and beliefs speak divers-colored out of your gestures.²

Mirrors, masks and veils: Nietzsche refers to an intellectual situation where cultural identity is lost. The old hierarchies are abolished, all times and peoples are equal, and the contemporaries have their features written on their faces in a completely random patchwork fashion—so that, as Nietzsche says, a decipherer trying to read these faces would despair because they represented a palimpsest of undistinguishable texts. Nietzsche describes a nightmare of historicism.³

ca! Sculpture of the Persians; the Horoscope of the Patriarkes; and the Reading of the Stars. Written in French by James Gaffarel. And Englished by Edmund Chilmead (London: Printed by G.D. for H. Moseley, 1650 [Paris, 1646]). A history of the image of Assyria in historical treatises from the period between the Renaissance and the eighteenth century, when scholars had begun to question the authority of the Bible, still needs to be written.

2. Translation by Thomas Common, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (New York: Heritage Press, 1970), p. 112. The German text reads:

Mit fünfzig Klexen bemalt an Gesicht und Gliedern: so saßet ihr da zu meinem Staunen, ihr Gegenwärtigen! Und mit fünfzig Spiegeln um euch, die eurem Farbenspiele schmeichelten und nachredeten! Wahrlich, ihr könntet gar keine bessere Maske tragen, ihr Gegenwärtigen, als euer eignes Gesicht ist! Wer könnte euch—*erkennen*! Vollgeschrieben mit den Zeichen der Vergangenheit, und auch diese Zeichen überpinselt mit neuen Zeichen: also habt ihr euch gut versteckt vor allen Zeichendeutern! ... Alle Zeiten und Völker blicken bunt aus euren Schleiern; alle Sitten und Glauben reden bunt aus euren Gebärden.

3. It appears that Nietzsche here subtly satirizes the famous German 'historical' historian Leopold von Ranke, who, in his programmatic treatise *Zur Kritik neuerer Geschichtsschreiber: Eine Beylage zu desselben romanischen und germanischen Geschichten* (Leipzig and Berlin: G. Reimer, 1824), p. iv, had remarked:

Wie einem zu Muth seyn würde, der in eine grosse Sammlung von Alterthümern träte, worin Aechtes und Unächtcs, Schönes und Zurücktossendes, Glänzendes

It is not without significance that the metaphor of decipherment features so prominently in the passage just quoted. For it was not least of all the decipherment of ancient writing systems that had provided the historical record Nietzsche found so unhealthily overwhelming. Since the second half of the eighteenth century, when J.-J. de Barthélemy had deciphered the Syrian inscriptions from Palmyra and A.H. Anquetil-Duperron had begun to study the Avesta,⁴ scholars had restlessly tackled unknown scripts. Their activity resulted in two particularly decisive breakthroughs: the decoding of the writing systems of ancient Egypt and, a little later, those of Mesopotamia.⁵ These achievements, 'decipherments', in fact, not only of scripts but of whole civilizations,⁶ opened up dimensions of the past hitherto completely unknown. The challenges thereby presented to traditional perceptions of history were immense.

This paper will discuss how the recovery of one specific 'lost' civilization, that of ancient Assyria, influenced the intellectual discourse of Nietzsche's 'present-day men' as well as their successors—and how, in turn, scholarly views of Assyrian culture and history have been shaped during the past 150 years by the changing spirit of the age. It goes without saying that constraints of space make it impossible to offer here much more than a very basic outline of some important trends.

Assyria's traditional image in the West, while largely negative, had not been completely free of contradictions.⁷ The Bible presented Assyria as a nation that,

und Unscheinbares, aus mancherley Nationen und Zeitaltern, ohne Ordnung neben einander läge, so etwa müsste sich auch der fühlen, der sich mit Einem Mal im Anschau der mannichfaltigen Denkmale der neuern Geschichte fände. Sie reden uns in tausend Stimmen an: sie zeigen die verschiedensten Naturen: sie sind in alle Farben gekleidet.

4. Peter T. Daniels, "Shewing of Hard Sentences and Dissolving of Doubts": The First Decipherment', *JAOS* 108 (1988), pp. 419-36; Raymond Schwab, *Vie d'Anquetil-Duperron, suivie des usages civils et religieux des Parses par Anquetil-Duperron* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1934).

5. See P.T. Daniels, 'Methods of Decipherment', in *The World's Writing Systems* (ed. P.T. Daniels and William Bright; New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 141-59. With regard to cuneiform, see also Robert William Rogers, *A History of Babylonia and Assyria* (2 vols.; New York and Cincinnati: Abingdon Press, 6th edn, 1915), I, pp. 1-273, and Mogens Trolle Larsen, 'Hincks versus Rawlinson: The Decipherment of the Cuneiform System of Writing', in *Ultra terminum vagari: Scritti in onore di Carl Nylander* (ed. Börje Magnusson et al.; Rome: Quasar, 1997), pp. 339-56.

6. See Hans Gerhard Kippenberg, *Die Entdeckung der Religionsgeschichte: Religionswissenschaft und Moderne* (München: C.H. Beck, 1997), pp. 45-51; Kippenberg uses the term 'Entzifferungen unbekannter Kulturen' and calls this period of European intellectual history 'eine orientalische Renaissance.'

7. See the very condensed overview given by Steven W. Holloway, *Aššur is King! Aššur is King! Religion in the Exercise of Power in the Neo-Assyrian Empire* (CHANE, 10; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2002), pp. 1-9; see also, by the present author, 'Zwischen Dichtung und Wahrheit: Assur und Assyrien in den Augen der Nachwelt', in *Wiedererstehendes Assur: 100 Jahre deutsche Aus-*

having suppressed the entire world as an agent of divine wrath, finally fell to this wrath itself. The classical tradition conveyed a more ambiguous image, one that preserved a certain admiration for Assyria's military, political, and architectural achievements but also stressed its rulers' brutality and decadence. The Assyrians were exotic in a way that could be both praiseworthy and horrifying.⁸

Biblical as well as classical images of Assyria informed the oeuvre of early nineteenth-century artists and poets. Lord Byron, to mention only the most prominent one, draws on the Bible in his 1815 poem 'The Raid of Sennacherib',⁹ and on Diodorus and other classical authors in his tragedy 'Sardanapalus', written in 1821.¹⁰ While the former work, renowned for its evocative *incipit* 'The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold', presents a dark image of the Assyrians, portraying them as merciless predators, the latter features a rather sensitive Assyrian protagonist who functions in many respects as the *alter ego* of the author.

Such artistic license to freely project onto the Assyrians one's own fears, desires and other emotions became severely limited when, from 1842 onwards, French and British excavators, led by Paul-Emile Botta and Austen Henry Layard, rediscovered the ancient capitals of Nineveh, Nimrūd, and Khorsabad in northern Iraq. These excavations cast light instead on the Assyrians themselves, unearthing thousands of their images carved on stone slabs and tens of thousands of cuneiform texts mostly written on clay tablets.¹¹ When the texts, which had been buried for almost two and a half millennia, were eventually deciphered, scholars rather than poets began to dominate the cultural discourse about Assyria.¹² Their claim was that with their access to the

grabungen in Assyrien (ed. Joachim Marzahn and Beate Salje; Mainz am Rhein: Philipp von Zabern, 2003), pp. 19-28.

8. Examples for such attitudes are provided in my discussions of the historical-literary 'after-life' of two of the most important Assyrian rulers, Sennacherib and Assurbanipal; see Eckart Frahm, *Einleitung in die Sanherib-Inschriften* (AfOB, 26; Vienna: Institut für Orientalistik der Universität Wien, 1997), pp. 21-28; *idem*, 'Images of Ashurbanipal in Later Tradition', in *Hayim and Miriam Tadmor Festschrift Volume* (ed. Israel Eph'al, Amnon Ben-Tor, Peter Machinist; Eretz Israel, 27; Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2003), pp. 37*-48*.

9. Lord Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works* (7 vols.; ed. Jerome J. McGann; Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press/Oxford University Press, 1981), III, pp. 309-10.

10. Byron, *Complete Poetical Works*, VI, pp. 15-128.

11. For an excellent account of the rediscovery of the ancient Assyrian cities, see M.T. Larsen, *The Conquest of Assyria: Excavations in an Antique Land 1840-1860* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); Larsen also discusses the intellectual repercussions the excavations had.

12. A recent discussion of the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship on Assyria is provided by Holloway, *Aššur is King*, pp. 9-79. Holloway focuses on the question of how scholars have assessed the problem of an alleged Assyrian religious imperialism, but provides important insights into many other aspects of modern Assyrian historiography as well. For the period up to World War II, see also Omar Carena, *History of the Near Eastern Historiography and its Problems 1852-1985*. Part 1: 1852-1945 (trans. E. Schmitz and L. Tosco; AOAT, 218/1;

primary sources, they would be able to assess more objectively what the 'real' Assyria had been.¹³

This promise of objectivity, however, was difficult to keep. In fact, Assyria continued to be studied not for its own sake, but for its links with the classical world and even more so with the Bible. One of the most widely read early histories of the ancient Near East was authored by George Rawlinson, who was not only a historian but a clergyman.¹⁴ His brother Henry Creswick Rawlinson, the influential British scholar who had helped to decipher the cuneiform writing system, claimed in 1852, referring to new insights into Assyrian and Babylonian chronology, that 'every new fact which is brought to light from the study of the Cuneiform inscriptions tends to confirm the scriptural account'.¹⁵ What the Rawlinson brothers and like-minded historians hoped for was that the historical texts from the Assyrian capitals would corroborate the reliability of the biblical account of history, which had come under close scrutiny as a result of research on the 'historical Jesus' and Higher Criticism applied to the Old Testament. For a while, the apologists of a Bible-centered world-view had their triumphs. The Assyrian sources provided irrefutable evidence for the historicity of Hebrew kings like Ahab or Hezekiah, and they showed that biblical references to Assyrian history were in many cases more accurate than what the classical sources had to offer.¹⁶

But the new texts also began to cast serious doubts on certain details of the biblical narratives, and they invalidated the Bible-based chronology that had been reconstructed with great care by Bishop Ussher and others in the seventeenth century.¹⁷ As early as 1847, a member of the Anglican church protested

Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1989); for the beginnings of American scholarship on ancient Assyria, see Benjamin R. Foster's contribution to the present volume.

13. The opinion shared by almost all scholars that the cuneiform records were more important as sources for a history of the ancient Near Eastern than the Bible and the classical texts is aptly summarized by Rogers, *History of Babylonia and Assyria*, I, pp. 387-88: 'The gain of the Old Testament has been greater from Assyrian studies than the reverse... As sources the Greek and Latin writers once held first place, but are now reduced to a very insignificant position by the native monumental records.'

14. George Rawlinson, *The Five Great Monarchies of the Ancient Eastern World; Or, the History, Geography, and Antiquities of Chaldaea, Assyria, Babylon, Media, and Persia, Collected and Illustrated from Ancient and Modern Sources* (4 vols.; London: John Murray, 1862-67).

15. Henry C. Rawlinson, *Outlines of Assyrian History from the Inscriptions of Nineveh: The Twenty-Ninth Annual Report of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain* (London: John W. Parker & Son, 1852), p. xv.

16. The most important and influential anthology of cuneiform texts related to biblical history published in the nineteenth century was Eberhard Schrader's *Die Keilschriften und das Alte Testament*, published in its first edition in 1872 in Giessen. An English translation of the second German edition, prepared by Owen C. Whitehouse, appeared under the title *The Cuneiform Inscriptions and the Old Testament* (London and Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1885-88).

17. See Larsen, *Conquest of Assyria*, pp. 157-76.

against the further prosecution of the excavations in Assyria, being alarmed at the idea that the annals of the Assyrian kings might test the credibility of biblical history.¹⁸ So while offering support for the reliability of the Bible in some respects, the discovery of Assyria created, at the same time, a considerable amount of historical confusion. This confusion contributed to an increasingly widespread feeling of what György Lukács described as 'transcendental homelessness'.¹⁹ Ever since the sixteenth century, when Copernicus invalidated the notion that the earth was the centre of the universe, there was a growing uneasiness among people in the West about the position of the human race in the cosmos, once firmly established by the Bible. This uneasiness reached new peaks in the middle of the nineteenth century when Darwin's discoveries put into question the presumption on the part of men that they possessed a divine soul and a divine descent. The recovery of primary sources from the ancient Near East that challenged the reliability of the *historia sacra* outlined in scripture made the traditional, Bible-based world-view even more dubious.²⁰

In the first decades after the rediscovery of the Assyrian capitals, it was not only the historical inscriptions of kings whose names were mentioned in the Bible that drew attention, but also the monuments of Assyria, especially the sculptures and reliefs from the palaces at Khorsabad, Nineveh, and Nimrud. With no pictorial evidence from biblical Israel available, the model for the visual record was set by the classical art of ancient Greece. Yet comparison between the newly discovered Eastern artifacts and the 'canonical' art of the West yielded, again, quite ambivalent results. While some authors tried to prove the complete inferiority of the Assyrian works, others saw in the Assyrian sculptures worthy predecessors of the classical masterpieces.²¹

Among the former was the cultural historian Jacob Burckhardt, whose judgment of Assyrian art and architecture was extremely severe. In his 'Reflections on History', originally conceived between 1868 and 1871, Burckhardt derides 'the utterly uncouth royal fortresses of Nineveh, [t]he meanness of their ground-plan and the slavishness of their sculptures'.²²

18. Larsen, *Conquest of Assyria*, p. 164.

19. György Lukács discusses this concept extensively in his *Theorie des Romans* (*Theory of the Novel* [trans. from the German by Anna Bostock; Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1971]).

20. Sigmund Freud referred to 'three blows' that undermined human narcissism in the modern age, the Copernican and the Darwinian revolutions and his own new insight that the 'ego is not master in its own house' (see the 18th chapter of his *Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, 18 vols. [ed. Anna Freud et al.; London: Imago Publishing Co., 1940 (1917)], XI, pp. 294-95). He could also have mentioned the 'disenchantment' caused by historical and philological investigations of ancient history and sacred texts.

21. The debate in nineteenth-century Europe about ancient Near Eastern art is the subject of Frederick N. Bohrer, *Orientalism and Visual Culture: Imagining Mesopotamia in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), and his contribution to this volume.

22. Jacob Burckhardt, *Reflections on History* (trans. M.D. Hottinger; Indianapolis, IN: Liberty

The qualification of Assyrian sculpture as 'slavish' shows where Burckhardt's criticism was rooted. For him, Assyrian art was nothing but a sad reflection of the 'Oriental despotism' that ruled the East. Burckhardt, Renaissance expert and citizen of Switzerland, an admirer of individual freedom and creativity, had no sympathy for an art that, as he saw it, achieved little more than the celebration of tyrants 'who conquered and enslaved and plundered and pillaged far and wide, who, followed by their booty and their slaves, entered Thebes or Nineveh in triumph and were regarded by the people as the beloved of God.'²³

Quite different from Burckhardt's attitude was the reception of Assyrian art in the capitals of France and Great Britain. In Paris and London, where the monumental Assyrian sculptures were actually displayed, they received criticism but principally admiration. John Ruskin, like Burckhardt an eminent expert on Italian culture, describes the Nineveh bulls as works of art that combined 'highest magnificence' with 'utmost nobleness.'²⁴ In the view of the educated French and British middle class, Assyria was not so much an epitome of 'Oriental despotism', but rather the first empire in history—and the heroic appropriation of Assyria's monumental art by the Louvre and the British Museum reflected the imperial ambitions France and Britain had themselves.

Summarizing the historical attitudes towards Assyria prevalent in the period between 1850 and 1871, it seems safe to say that there was not only an 'anti-quarian' approach, representing the historicist spirit of the age, but also a 'monumental' one, as in the case of Ruskin, and a 'critical' one, exemplified by Burckhardt.²⁵ It is interesting to note that no coherent 'romantic' vision of ancient Assyria arose during the period in question. Paintings and drawings

Classics, 1979), p. 126. The original text reads: 'Die größten technischen und künstlerischen Genies vermochten an den ganz ungeschlachten Königsbürgen von Ninive nichts zu ändern; die elende Anlage und die knechtische Skulptur regierten die Jahrhunderte hindurch weiter' (J. Burckhardt, *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen* [ed. Jakob Oeri; Berlin and Stuttgart: W. Spemann, 1905], p. 86). The critical attitude Burckhardt and other modern students of universal history (Karl Marx, Eduard Meyer, Max Weber, V. Gordon Childe, Karl Polanyi) maintained with regard to the Assyrian city and urban space in the Middle East in general is discussed by Mario Liverani, 'Ancient Near Eastern Cities and Modern Ideologies', in *Die orientalische Stadt: Kontinuität, Wandel, Bruch: 1. Internationales Colloquium der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft*, 9.-10. Mai 1996 in Halle/Saale (ed. Gernot Wilhelm; Colloquien der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft, 1; Saarbrücken: Saarbrücker Druckerei & Verlag, 1997), pp. 85-107.

23. Burckhardt, *Reflections on History*, p. 67. The passage precedes Burckhardt's famous statement that 'power is in itself evil' ('die Macht an sich böse ist').

24. John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, vol. 3, ch. 3, § 69, in *The Works of Ruskin* (39 vols.; ed. Edward T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn; London: G. Allen; New York: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1903-12), XI, p. 188; the first edition of *The Stones of Venice* had appeared in 1851. See Bohrer, *Orientalism and Visual Culture*, pp. 165-66 for a fuller quotation and an extended discussion.

25. This classification takes up the historiographic categories introduced by Nietzsche in his 1874 essay 'On the Use and Abuse of History for Life.'

from the time showing Western excavators in Oriental garb or featuring turban-wearing Arabs who gaze, with horror and fascination, at human-headed bull-colossi as they emerge from the rubble²⁶ romanticize the excavations but not Assyrian civilization itself. Historians writing on ancient Assyria did not follow the example of F. Max Müller, the famous Oxford-based Sanskritist, who had claimed that the ancient texts from India revealed elements of the 'authentic' and true original religion of mankind.²⁷ Assyrian culture, in spite of its great age, never attracted such comments in the early age of Assyriology.

The most important reason for this rather reserved attitude was the nature of the cuneiform texts that were deciphered in the first three decades after the excavations had started. The bulk of them were royal inscriptions glorifying Assyria's bloody conquests. Highlighting the humiliation, torture, and killing of enemy combatants and civilians,²⁸ these accounts of the military triumphs of a ruthlessly expansionist state were unsuitable for a 'mystical' reading in the tradition of Müller. Deities appeared in the texts almost exclusively as supporters of a militaristic king who would, in return for their favors, build them temples, and as agents of wrath in the concluding curse formulas. Assyrian 'spirituality' was largely absent from them.

But slowly, literary and religious texts from the library of the Assyrian king Assurbanipal at Nineveh were deciphered as well, and the excavations in the Mesopotamian South enlarged the corpus of cuneiform documents and expanded the horizon to earlier periods of Mesopotamian history. On December 3, 1872, George Smith, a brilliant cuneiformist who worked as an assistant in the British Museum, reported his identification of a Nineveh tablet with the story of the deluge to the Society of Biblical Archaeology in London. Smith presented to his audience, which included the British Prime Minister, William Gladstone, one of the first major texts illustrating non-military aspects of Assyrian civilization.²⁹ Newspaper announcements in the *London Times* brought Smith's pioneering work worldwide attention.³⁰

26. See, for example, the watercolor painting of Layard in Bakhtiari dress, and Layard's drawing of Arabs in an excavation pit; these two images are reproduced in Larsen, *The Conquest of Assyria*, p. 91 and pl. 1.

27. On Max Müller see Kippenberg, *Entdeckung der Religionsgeschichte*, pp. 70-73.

28. Aššur-nāšir-apli II, for example, boasts in his annals that after conquering the city of Tela, he 'gouged out the eyes of many troops', 'burnt their adolescent boys and girls', and 'razed, destroyed, burnt, and consumed the city' (RIMA II, pp. 201-202: i 117-ii 1).

29. For an account of the meeting, see Rogers, *History of Assyria and Babylonia*, I, pp. 278-80.

30. George Smith, 'The Chaldean History of the Deluge', *The [London] Times*, no. 27551, December 4, 1872; and 'The Chaldean Story of the Deluge', *The [London] Times*, no. 27552, December 5, 1872. In January 1873, Edwin Arnold, the editor of *The Daily Telegraph*, arranged with Smith that he should go to Nineveh at the expense of that journal to carry out new excavations and look for additional fragments of the flood story.

Again, though, as in the case of the Assyrian historical inscriptions, this attention had to do with the Bible. The cuneiform flood story did not find interest for its own sake, but because of its close parallels with the story of Noah. The public was fascinated because it could indulge in the recognition of semblance (or ἀναγνωρίσις, to use the famous Aristotelian term),³¹ the reference point being the sacred book of Genesis. When W.H.F. Talbot, one year later, published his translation of another mythological text from Assurbanipal's library, 'Ištar's Descent to the Netherworld',³² people were intrigued because they believed the text revealed that the Assyrians believed in the concept of an immortal soul.³³ Once more, Christian doctrine determined the way Assyrian religious texts were received.

Assyriology remained the *ancilla theologiae* for almost three more decades, a quarry for material that could be used to fill up holes in the venerated house of the Bible. But around 1900, the servant was eventually fed up with her role and ready to overthrow her mistress. The act that marks this intellectual rebellion most prominently was a widely discussed lecture on 'Babel and Bible' which the German Assyriologist Friedrich Delitzsch gave in Berlin on January 13, 1902 in the presence of emperor Wilhelm II.³⁴ Delitzsch turned over the traditional hierarchy between the Bible and the Mesopotamian texts, which by then formed an impressive corpus. He no longer believed, as George Rawlinson had,³⁵ in a Hebrew 'Ur-monotheism.' Instead, using the romantic argument that greater age meant greater purity, he claimed that the Hebrew Bible offered little more than a distorted rewriting of stories and theological concepts that had originated in Mesopotamia.³⁶ Later, Delitzsch even suggested that the Old Tes-

31. The concept of ἀναγνωρίσις is discussed in chapter 14 of Aristotle's *Poetics*; it refers to a structure of recognition in which the subject of consciousness finds the comfort of identity and self-sameness.

32. 'The Legend of Ishtar Descending to Hades', *TSBA* 2 (1873), pp. 179-212.

33. See, for example, Jules Oppert, 'L'immortalité de l'âme chez les Chaldéens', *Annales de philosophie chrétienne* 87 (1874), pp. 210-33, and the articles by Talbot discussed by Holloway, *Aššur is King*, p. 34 (with exact references). The idea that 'Ishtar's Descent' is related to Christian pneumatology was eventually given up by most scholars, but has been recently revived by Simo Parpola in his *Assyrian Prophecies* (SAA, 9; Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1997), pp. xxxi-xxxvi. Parpola's approach to Assyrian religion and culture will be discussed at the end of this paper.

34. Friedrich Delitzsch, *Babel und Bibel: Ein Vortrag* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1902). For an English translation of the lecture, see *idem*, *Babel and Bible: A Lecture on the Significance of Assyriological Research for Religion. Delivered before the German Emperor* (trans. Thomas J. McCormack; Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., 1902).

35. See Holloway, *Aššur is King*, p. 35.

36. For Delitzsch and the Babel-Bible debate see Reinhard G. Lehmann, *Friedrich Delitzsch und der Babel-Bibel-Streit* (OBO, 133; Freiburg, Switzerland: Universitätsverlag/Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994) and Klaus Johanning, *Der Bibel-Babel-Streit: Eine forschungsgeschichtliche Studie* (Europäische Hochschulschriften, Reihe 23, Theologie, 343; Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1988).

tament, because of its derivative nature, should be completely abolished by the Christians of the modern age.³⁷

Delitzsch had called his lectures 'Babel and Bible', not 'Assyria and the Bible.' But his choice of title was clearly guided more by the desire to offer a clever alliterative wordplay and to stress the importance of the German excavations in Babylon begun in 1899³⁸ than by the wish to exclude Assyria from his presentation. Much of the material discussed by Delitzsch was in fact Assyrian.³⁹ With its autocratic political system and somewhat 'Prussian' militarism, both Delitzsch and his friend the Kaiser found a lot to admire in ancient Assyria.⁴⁰

Delitzsch gave his lectures as a new ideological trend was gaining momentum: racism. Race-based thinking had already informed, in the later decades of the nineteenth century, a debate among scholars of the ancient Near East about Semites and Sumerians, with anti-Semitic zealots generalizing about the cultural sterility of the Semitic Babylonians and Assyrians, who had taken over civilization—and most prominently, the art of writing—from the non-Semitic Sumerians.⁴¹ Delitzsch himself was not free of such prejudice; in fact, his anti-Semitism had an ever-increasing impact on his historical perception.⁴² To rec-

37. Delitzsch, *Die große Täuschung: Kritische Betrachtungen zu den alttestamentlichen Berichten über Israels Eindringen in Kanaan, die Gottesoffenbarung vom Sinai und die Wirksamkeit der Propheten* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1920).

38. In 1899, Delitzsch wrote in the *Illustrierte Zeitung*, no. 113: 'Nineveh, the palace of Sardanapalus—England's fame is forever entwined with these names. Babylon, the royal city of Nebuchadnezzar—might it be a mission worthy of Germany to be associated with these names?' (quoted in Bohrer, *Orientalism*, p. 272).

39. At the beginning of the twentieth century, most of the cuneiform texts that had been published came from Assyria, which remained in the center of many histories of the ancient Near East.

40. Wilhelm II was deeply interested in the history of the ancient Near East. When in exile after World War I, he wrote a book on kingship in Mesopotamia in which he celebrated the Assyrian ruler Assurbanipal as a 'redeemer king' ('Erlöserkönig') whose reign had brought about a new 'spring of the nations' (Wilhelm II, *Das Königtum im alten Mesopotamien* [Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1938], p. 41).

41. See Jerrold S. Cooper, 'Posing the Sumerian Question: Race and Scholarship in the Early History of Assyriology', *AuOr* 9 (1991), pp. 47-66; *idem*, 'Sumerian and Aryan: Racial Theory, Academic Politics and Parisian Assyriology', *RevHistRel* 210 (1993), pp. 169-205. The debate is reminiscent of the 'Aryan turn' that had started to affect the discipline of classics in the late eighteenth century, with scholars maintaining that Hellenic civilization was superior because of the 'race' of the Greeks; see Bernal, *Black Athena*, I, pp. 189-366. The Aryan ideas that permeated nineteenth-century classical studies can be explained at least partly as a reaction of Western scholars to the 'narcissistic blow' they had received when it became more and more obvious that the 'foreign' civilizations of Egypt and the ancient Near East, which could claim genealogical precedence over Israel, Greece, and Rome, were highly sophisticated.

42. See Bill T. Arnold and David B. Weisberg, 'Babel und Bibel und Bias: How Anti-Semitism Distorted Friedrich Delitzsch's Scholarship', *Bible Review* 18 (2002), pp. 32-40.

oncle this resentment with his positive view of the Assyrian empire, Delitzsch had to downplay the Semitic character of the Assyrians and to claim that the Assyrian people had received significant Indo-European infusions. Ironically, Delitzsch went back, with this claim, to ideas about the Assyrians from the days when cuneiform had not yet been deciphered and only biblical and classical sources were available.⁴³ Since Mesopotamian texts did not provide any evidence for an Indo-European background of the Assyrians, Delitzsch turned to the completely unfounded and rather desperate argument that Assurbanipal's wife was depicted, on a stone relief from Nineveh, with Aryan features and blond hair.⁴⁴

Delitzsch's new approach to the history of the ancient Near East received a lot of criticism both from colleagues and from the Christian establishment of his time. The 'Pan-Babylonism' he and other German Assyriologists advocated was rightfully dismissed,⁴⁵ and for quite a while, any research on cultural contacts between Mesopotamia and the Levant seemed discredited. After World War I, influential scholars claimed for the first time that the civilizations of ancient Mesopotamia should be studied within their own cultural framework, an approach that found its most prominent expression in Benno Landsberger's famous concept of 'Eigenbegrifflichkeit' ('conceptual autonomy'), introduced in his inaugural lecture as a professor at the University of Leipzig in 1926.⁴⁶ The

43. In a book about the Phoenicians published in the middle of the nineteenth century (*Die Phönizier* [2 vols.; Bonn and Berlin: Eduard Weber, 1841–50]), F.C. Movers had expressed his admiration for the brutal Assyrian conquerors and had theorized that their military prowess had to be due to 'white' influences (II/1, pp. 300–303, 420); see Bernal, *Black Athena*, I, p. 360. Following Movers, the openly racist Arthur Gobineau, in his *Essais sur l'inégalité des races humaines* from 1853–55, explained the domination the Assyrians had exercised in antiquity by claiming: '[Q]u'à proportion où je m'élève vers le nord, je rencontre les éléments blancs dans un meilleur état de pureté et avec une abondance incomparable. Or les États assyriens étaient, de toutes les fondations chamo-sémites, les plus reculées dans cette direction. Ils étaient sans cesse atteints par des immigrations, latentes ou déclarées, descendues des montagnes du nord-est. C'est donc là qu'était la cause de leur longue, de leur séculaire prépondérance' (Gobineau, *Oeuvres* [3 vols.; ed. Jean Gaulmier and Jean Boissel; Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 306; Paris: Gallimard, 1983], I, pp. 407–408).

44. '[A]jugenscheinlich ist diese Gemahlin Sardanapals eine Prinzessin arischen Geblüts und blondhaarig zu denken' (Delitzsch, *Babel und Bibel: Ein Vortrag*, pp. 19–20). It may seem surprising that Delitzsch's audience took such statements seriously. But Delitzsch, in his earlier career, had tackled other problems, particularly in the field of Akkadian grammar, with great methodological rigor, which provided him with a scholarly authority difficult to challenge.

45. For a brief overview of Pan-Babylonism see Jürgen Ebach, 'Panbabylonismus', in *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe* (4 vols.; ed. Burkhard Gladigow, Hubert Cancik and Karl-Heinz Kohl; Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1998), IV, pp. 302–304.

46. Benno Landsberger, 'Die Eigenbegrifflichkeit der babylonischen Welt: ein Vortrag', *Islamica* 2 (1926), pp. 355–72; an English translation was published as *The Conceptual Autonomy of the Babylonian World* (trans. Thorkild Jacobsen, Benjamin R. Foster and H. von Soden; Monographs on the Ancient Near East, 1/4; Malibu: Undena, 1976).

period after World War I also marks the discovery that Assyrian history, which in the early decades of Assyriology had been regarded as almost synonymous with the history of the Neo-Assyrian empire, possessed a *longue durée* hitherto little known. Thanks to the publication of texts from the Assyrian capital at Assur and from Kültepe in Turkey, the site of the ancient city of Kaneš, which had housed a large Assyrian trade colony in the first centuries of the second millennium, the significance of the Old Assyrian and Middle Assyrian phases of Assyrian history became increasingly understood,⁴⁷ and it became clear that the Assyrians had started their historical mission not as military conquerors, but as traders and businessmen operating from a small city-state.⁴⁸

But in spite of these new perspectives, some of the old questions retained a prominent place on the scholarly agenda. Delitzsch's racist ideas continued to find resonance in Germany.⁴⁹ The discovery of the mid-second millennium state of Mitanni with its Indo-Aryan ruling class provided the eagerly expected Indo-Europeans, which fostered speculations, again poorly founded, that the creation of the Middle-Assyrian territorial state and its institutions was the consequence of an Indo-European influx. Even an eminent scholar like Wolfram von Soden followed this line of argumentation. In a 1937 paper on the 'historical problem posed by the rise of the Assyrian empire',⁵⁰ he claimed that a work like the Tukulti-Ninurta epic, a celebration of warfare and individual courage from late thirteenth-century Assyria, was unthinkable without assuming some Indo-Aryan background. The Semitic Assyrians alone, according to von Soden, could not have possessed the creative capacity and heroic character necessary to create such a text.⁵¹

47. See the overviews on the archaeological excavations at Assur by Roland W. Lamprichs and Kaneš by Tahsin Özgüç in *OEAANE* I, pp. 225–28 and III, pp. 266–68, respectively.

48. An insight so surprising that it remained highly contested for a long time. When Hildegard Lewy wrote the chapter about the early history of Assyria, 'Assyria c. 2600–1816 B.C.', for *CAH* I/2, pp. 729–70, she still maintained that there had been an Old Assyrian empire.

49. For an overview of the history of ancient Near Eastern studies in Berlin, the center of some of the most important debates that took place during the period between 1875 and 1945, see Johannes Renger, 'Die Geschichte der Altorientalistik und der Vorderasiatischen Archäologie in Berlin von 1875 bis 1945', in *Berlin und die Antike: Architektur, Kunstgewerbe, Malerei, Skulptur, Theater und Wissenschaft vom 16. Jahrhundert bis heute* (Aufsätze) (ed. Willmuth Arenhövel and Christa Schreiber; Berlin: Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, 1979), pp. 151–92.

50. *Der Aufstieg des Assyrischen Reiches als geschichtliches Problem* (Der Alte Orient, 37/1–2; Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs Verlag, 1937).

51. Von Soden wrote

Diese Verächtlichmachung einer im Orient durchaus gebräuchlichen und sonst auch als unanstößig empfundenen Kampfform [the defensive tactics of the Babylonians] kommt uns in einer semitischen Dichtung sehr unerwartet und erinnert ebenso wie viele andere Eigentümlichkeiten der Kampfeschilderung an die Heldendichtung indogermanischer Völker. Der Gedanke, daß mit einer solchen Erinnerung mehr als nur zufällige Ähnlichkeiten aufgedeckt sein sollen, erscheint zunächst abwegig; er

To some extent, the weak foundation of his arguments must have been obvious even to von Soden himself, who in later publications never repeated his racial explanation for the spirit of the Middle-Assyrian age.⁵² In his books and articles on Akkadian lexicography and grammar, the fields to which he made his great contributions, von Soden did not succumb to the temptation of complying with Nazi ideology; his numerous references to his Jewish teacher Landsberger led in fact to heavy attacks on him by his colleague Carl Frank, who was an unshakable Nazi.⁵³ Historians who followed the Nazi ideology wholeheartedly had their own way to solve the problem of the 'heroic' bellicosity of the Assyrians, so incompatible with the prevailing ideas about the nature of the Semites: they just ignored Assyria. In F. Taeger's history of the ancient world,⁵⁴ written in 1939, the author, after having covered ancient Near Eastern history up to the invasions by the Sea Peoples, immediately switches to the Greeks, without ever penning a single word about the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian empires.

In the period after World War II, the attitude towards Assyria among scholars in the Western world changed again. The Semitic character of the Assyrians was no longer a problem, but their bellicosity, imperial ambitions and auto-

wird aber unabweisbar, wenn wir zugleich an die jahrhundertlange Herrschaft der mindestens seit 1500... von Ariern geführten Churrier bzw. Mitanni in Vorderasien denken, die uns... zu der Frage nötigte, ob wir im Assyrienvolk seit der Mitannizeit nicht auch mit einem gewissen arischen und damit nordrassigen Einschlag zu rechnen haben... Daß das Epos nicht ausschließlich oder doch überwiegend durch das Semitentum bestimmt ist, zeigt ja übrigens auch die Tatsache, daß diese Art von Dichtung im 1. Jahrtausend, in dem die Semiten die arischen Volkssplitter sich restlos angeglichen hatten, offenbar nicht mehr gepflegt wurde (*Aufstieg*, pp. 26-27).

52. The question in how far certain institutions of the Middle-Assyrian state were influenced by Hittite-Mittani traditions is still debated, but scholars now focus on political and cultural contact, not on racial influx. Walter Mayer, a student of von Soden, maintains, in his *Politik und Kriegskunst der Assyrer* (ALASPM, 9; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1995), pp. 220-27, that the influence was strong, while Andreas Fuchs, in his review of Mayer's book in *AJO* 44-45 (1997-98), pp. 409-17, argues that many innovations that took place in Assyria in the Middle-Assyrian period can be explained as internal developments.

53. In *Lamastu, Pazuzu und andere Dämonen: Ein Beitrag zur babylonisch-assyrischen Dämonologie* (MAOG, 14/2; Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1941), p. 24, Frank writes that another German scholar, Erich Ebeling, had published the difficult text VAT 10057 'without help from Jewish or any other side' ('ohne jüdische oder sonstige Hilfe'), while von Soden, in his own—deficient—edition, had profited from support received from his 'gratefully honored Jewish teacher and co-editor': 'Trotz der sehr weitgehenden Unterstützung, die der Verfasser [von Soden] auch hier wieder von seinem dankbar verehrten jüdischen Lehrer und Mitherausgeber angenommen hat, ist diese Neubearbeitung alles andere als fehlerlos...' On von Soden's personal implications with Nazism, see R. Borger's obituary of him, 'Wolfram von Soden (19. 6. 1908-6. 10. 1996)', *AJO* 44-45 (1997-98), pp. 588-94.

54. Fritz Taeger, *Das Altertum: Geschichte und Gestalt* (3 vols.; Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1939), I; Carcna, *History of the Near Eastern Historiography*, pp. 75, 131.

cratic political system, earlier regarded as legitimate and laudable, were now seen as highly objectionable. In the democratic societies of the post-war period, the Assyrians were quite unsuitable to serve as a role model. The disgust some scholars felt when they had to deal with Assyria was strong. In *The Treasures of Darkness*, a widely read history of Mesopotamian religion, the Danish-American Assyriologist Thorkild Jacobsen banished the religions of the first millennium, when Assyria reached its imperial peak, to an 'epilogue' of thirteen pages, and justified this treatment by saying:

In terms of insight and depth, the second millennium B.C. can rightly be said to mark the high point of ancient Mesopotamian religious achievement. The millennium that followed contributed no major new insights, rather, it brought in many ways decline and brutalization.⁵⁵

According to Jacobsen, the 'only real religious insight that can be credited to the first millennium in Mesopotamia' was the 'quietistic piety' of the Aramean tribesmen, which the Assyrian and Babylonian kings of this age applied to war—'often to ruthless and cruel war.'⁵⁶

Jacobsen's exclusion of Assyrian religion from the annals of history may appear extreme,⁵⁷ but his assessment of Assyria as an empire of unrelenting violence that had nothing to contribute to the world in terms of intellectual or spiritual achievement was not untypical. The idea that Assyria was a brutal, superstition-ridden autocratic state with an army engaged in constant attacks on defenseless opponents was widespread and found its way into many general books on Mesopotamian history.⁵⁸ Scholars who specialized in Assyrian studies during the time between 1950 and 1985 left such views largely unchallenged.

55. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 223. Jacobsen's preference for the earlier history of Mesopotamia, which was, of course, the period he studied most intensively, is already apparent in his article 'Primitive Democracy in Ancient Mesopotamia', *JNES* 2 (1943), pp. 159-72.

56. Jacobsen, *Treasures of Darkness*, p. 238.

57. The god Aššur is mentioned only very rarely in the book (pp. 159, 167, 232, 234) and almost exclusively in the context of references to the Assyrian version of *Enūma eliš*, where Aššur replaces the Babylonian god Marduk.

58. See, for example, Hartmut Schmökel, *Geschichte des alten Vorderasien* (Handbuch der Orientalistik. 1 Abt., Der Nahe und der Mittlere Osten; 2. Bd., 3. Abschnitt; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1957), p. 249: 'Sie (the Assyrians) kennen weder Geländeschwierigkeiten noch Skrupel, geschweige denn menschliche Gefühle gegenüber ihren Feinden, die sie foltern, schinden, pfählen... Sklaverei und Deportation bedeutet... Milde. Grausamste Massenexekutionen sind... Dienst an Staat und Gott... Es liegt eine blutige Folgerichtigkeit in diesem Jahrhunderte währenden Schreckensregime, das das Urbild für die apokalyptischen Greuel der Bibel abgegeben hat.' On a lighter note, see Larry R. Gonick's widely read *Cartoon History of the Universe, Book 1* (San Francisco: Rip Off Press, 1978), which claims that 'the Assyrian priesthood, addicted to mumbo-jumbo, had let the practice of medicine slide from a reasonable high level into a mess of magic spells' and presents an Assyrian king who asks himself in despair: 'O dear! Wot shall it be today? Flay, flog, mutilate, impale, or put them on leashes in doghouses?'

Primarily philological in nature, their work was concerned with establishing a better understanding of the Assyrian lexicon and Assyrian grammar⁵⁹ and not so much with writing history—although there were some notable exceptions: Hayim Tadmor and his students tried to provide a more sophisticated evaluation of Assyrian power and propaganda, and the so-called Italian school, rooted in the intellectual and social upheavals of the late sixties, applied structuralist and semiotic approaches to the study of Assyria.⁶⁰

The past two decades have brought some notable new developments in Assyrian studies. Perhaps most important is the publication of large numbers of Assyrian texts in reliable new editions. A Helsinki-based project, *State Archives of Assyria*, directed by Simo Parpola, has published thousands of Assyrian letters and legal documents,⁶¹ and the Toronto-based *Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia* project has produced, under the direction of A. Kirk Grayson, editions of the inscriptions of all the Assyrian kings who ruled before 745 BCE.⁶² Old Assyrian studies have also seen a remarkable resurgence.⁶³ The publication of

59. Here, the contributions of Karlheinz Deller are of particular importance; for a bibliography of Deller's works, see Gerlinde Mauer and Ursula Magen, 'Schriftenverzeichnis Karlheinz Deller', in *Ad bene et fideliter seminandum: Festgabe für Karlheinz Deller zum 21. Februar 1987* (ed. Gerlinde Mauer and Ursula Magen; AOAT, 220; Kevalaer: Butzon & Bercker/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1988), pp. 1-23, with additions at <http://assyriologie.uni-hd.de/Deller.pdf>.

60. Good examples for the approaches of these schools are Hayim Tadmor and Moshe Weinfield (eds.), *History, Historiography, and Interpretation: Studies in Biblical and Cuneiform Literatures* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984) and Frederick Mario Falck (ed.), *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions: New Horizons in Literary, Ideological, and Historical Analysis. Papers of a Symposium held in Cetona (Siena), June 26-28, 1980* (Orientis antiqui collectio, 17; Rome: Istituto per l'Oriente, 1981).

61. S. Parpola (general editor), *State Archives of Assyria* (Helsinki University Press, 1987-). So far, 18 volumes have appeared. Additional publications of the project include a journal: *State Archives of Assyria Bulletin* (1987-2001, 13 volumes), a series of monographic studies: *State Archives of Assyria Studies* (The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1992-), 16 volumes), and the *Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire* (The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1998-), 3 volumes).

62. A.K. Grayson, *Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia: Assyrian Periods* (3 vols.; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987-96). New publications of inscriptions of later kings include Hayim Tadmor, *The Inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III, King of Assyria: Critical Edition, with Introductions, Translations, and Commentary* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1994), A. Fuchs, *Die Inschriften Sargons II. aus Khorsabad* (Göttingen: Cuvillier Verlag, 1994), and R. Borger, *Beiträge zum Inschriftenwerk Assurbanipals: Die Prismenklassen A, B, C = K, D, E, F, G, H, J und T sowie andere Inschriften* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1996).

63. See Cécile Michel, *Old Assyrian Bibliography of Cuneiform Texts, Bullae, Seals and the Results of the Excavations at Aššur, Kültepe/Kaniš, Acemhöyük, Alişar and Boğazköy* (Old Assyrian Archives, Studies, 1; PIHANS, 97; Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 2003).

Assyrian archival texts and monumental inscriptions has clearly made great progress in recent years.

At the same time, some influential scholars have created yet another new 'image' of Assyria. Somewhat surprisingly, this image is not so much based on Assyrian politics, economics or military matters, all areas for which a lot of new material has become available through the editorial projects just described. Instead, it emphasizes Assyrian culture and religion. In a complete reversal of Jacobsen's approach, the scholars in question have portrayed Assyria as a cradle of civilization, a source for ideas and institutions that influenced both the Biblical world and classical Greece. Recent books such as Stephanie Dalley's *Legacy of Mesopotamia*⁶⁴ and Martin West's *East Face of Helicon*,⁶⁵ with their long catalogues of cultural borrowings from Assyria, represent prominent examples of this neo-diffusionist approach. West forcefully claims that the Homeric epics were influenced by Assyrian royal inscriptions and literary texts from Assurbanipal's famous library,⁶⁶ while Dalley and Uehlinger credit the Assyrians with the construction of such legendary buildings as the 'hanging gardens of Babylon' and the biblical 'tower of Babel', architectural marvels that they believe were mistakenly attributed, by classical and biblical authors, to the Babylonians.⁶⁷ The influential *Melammu* project, originating in Helsinki, has held a number of conferences gathering scholars from all over the world to discuss the impact that Mesopotamian, and especially Assyrian culture had on neighboring civilizations, and to evaluate its legacy in the Western world.⁶⁸

64. Stephanie Dalley, *The Legacy of Mesopotamia* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

65. M.L. West, *The East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

66. West, *The East Face of Helicon*, pp. 334-437.

67. On the Hanging Gardens and their possible location in Nineveh, see S. Dalley, 'Nineveh, Babylon and the Hanging Gardens: Cuneiform and Classical Sources Reconciled', *Iraq* 56 (1994), pp. 45-58, and Karen Polinger Foster, 'The Hanging Gardens of Nineveh', *Iraq* 66 (2004), pp. 207-20 (with a full bibliography). On the story of the tower of Babel reflecting the construction of Dūr-Šarrukēn by Sargon II of Assyria, see Christoph Uehlinger, *Weltreich und 'eine Rede': Eine neue Deutung der sogenannten Turmbauerzählung (Gen 11, 1-9)* (OBO, 101; Freiburg, Switzerland: Universitätsverlag/Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990).

68. So far, the following conference volumes have been published: Sanna Aro and Robert M. Whiting (eds.), *The Heirs of Assyria: Proceedings of the Opening Symposium of the Assyrian and Babylonian Intellectual Heritage Project, Held in Tvärminne, Finland, October 8-11, 1998* (Melammu Symposia, 1; Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2000); R.M. Whiting (ed.), *Mythology and Mythologies: Methodological Approaches to Intercultural Influences: Proceedings of the Second Annual Symposium of the Assyrian and Babylonian Intellectual Heritage Project, Held in Paris, France, Oct. 4-7, 1999* (Melammu Symposia, 2; Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2001); Antonio Panaino and Giovanni Pettinato (eds.), *Ideologies as Intercultural Phenomena: Proceedings of the Third Annual Symposium of the Assyrian and Babylonian Intellectual Heritage Project, Held in Chicago, USA, October 27-31, 2000* (Melammu Symposia, 3; Milan: Università di Bologna/Roma: IsIAO, 2002); Robert Rollinger and Christoph

Like earlier attitudes towards Assyria, the neo-diffusionist trends that the *Melammu* project and the aforementioned books reveal seem to be related to certain developments in the contemporary world. In the increasingly globalized economy of the post-communist period, it has become more urgent to ask questions about cultural contacts and the migration of technologies and ideas—and research projects addressing such topics have been more likely to obtain funding.⁶⁹ There is no doubt that Assyriologists engaged in this kind of inquiry have made valuable contributions to ancient Near Eastern studies, but some of their results require more discussion.

It is important to stress that Dalley and West do not claim that it was Assyria alone whence civilization radiated; they credit Babylonia and other ancient states with a number of cultural 'firsts' as well. Simo Parpola, however, the third major advocate of neo-diffusionism in ancient Near Eastern studies, has in effect propagated what could be called a somewhat 'Pan-Assyrian' model, one that seems in many respects similar to the Pan-Babylonism that thrived one hundred years ago—and perhaps even not too far away from the mystical philology of F. Max Müller. Possibly inspired by his encounters with Neo-Aramean Assyrian Christians⁷⁰ Parpola has tirelessly claimed in numerous articles written during the past fifteen years that central concepts of both the Western and the Eastern worlds, such as monotheism, mysticism, the idea of redemption, gnosticism or Zoroastrianism, are all ultimately rooted in Assyria.⁷¹ So far, most

Ulf (eds.), *Commerce and Monetary Systems in the Ancient World: Means of Transmission and Cultural Interaction: Proceedings of the Fifth Annual Symposium of the Assyrian and Babylonian Intellectual Heritage Project, Held in Innsbruck, Austria, October 3rd-8th 2002* (Melammu Symposia, 5; Stuttgart: Steiner, 2004).

69. See the remarks by Liverani, 'Ancient Near Eastern Cities', p. 107.

70. See Parpola, 'Assyrians after Assyria', *Journal of the Assyrian Academic Society* 12/2 (2000), pp. 1-16, and available online at http://www.aanf.org/America/assyrians/assyrians_assyria.htm, accessed September 28, 2006. Note that the Assyrian Academic Society is a sponsor of the *Melammu* project.

71. See especially: Parpola, 'The Assyrian Tree of Life: Tracing the Origins of Jewish Monotheism and Greek Philosophy', *JNES* 52 (1993), pp. 161-208; *idem*, *Assyrian Prophecies*, pp. xiii-cviii; *idem*, 'Monotheism in Ancient Assyria', in *One God or Many? Concepts of Divinity in the Ancient World* (ed. Barbara Nevling Porter; Transactions of the Casco Bay Assyriological Institute, 1; [Chebeague, ME:] Casco Bay Assyriological Institute, 2000), pp. 165-209; *idem*, 'The Originality of the Teachings of Zarathustra in the Light of Yasna 44', in *Sefer Moshe: The Moshe Weinfeld Jubilee Volume: Studies in the Bible and the Ancient Near East, Qumran, and Post-Biblical Judaism* (ed. Chaim Cohen, Avi Hurvitz and Shalom M. Paul; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), pp. 373-83. Parpola's scholarly agenda brings to mind again what Benno Landsberger wrote 80 years ago: 'Thus the scholar [in the field of Assyriology] faces his own subject unmoved and aloof, and precisely those men to whom our science owes most look for more rewarding research problems outside their field. They are trying—and this was the impulse which brought Assyriology into existence—to make dead things alive by connecting them up with ideas that are still of importance to us or to civilizations close to us' (*Conceptual Autonomy of the Babylonian World*, p. 6).

scholars who have taken a closer look at Parpola's ideas have at least partly dismissed them,⁷² but the debate is certainly not yet over.

Summarizing this all too superficial overview⁷³ of how the scholarly discourse on ancient Assyria meandered along in the West during the past two centuries, it is evident that specific ideological agendas—the religious and imperial ideas of the nineteenth century, the racial views of the first half of the twentieth, the democratic and globalist perspectives of the period that followed World War II—all had their impact. At the same time, the 'image' of Assyria was adapted and readapted to new textual and archaeological discoveries, by scholars who had specific personal interests and idiosyncrasies, and who never ceased to be occupied, intrigued, and irritated by the question of how to position Assyria in the context of 'their own' biblical and classical tradition.

What a modern scholar can learn from an investigation of the history of his discipline is critical awareness of the contingency of his own intellectual approach. The Assyriologist who looks back at the scholarship of his predecessors may realize that he is probably well advised to show a certain degree of skepticism with regard to overly essentialist statements about ancient Assyria. Such skepticism is all the more warranted in the light of the many transformations Assyrian civilization experienced during its long history. *Assur* was a city that served as a trade hub in the Old Assyrian period, an aggressive territorial state in the Late Bronze age, and an empire in the first millennium—what can be said without qualification is that Assyria was a political entity that successfully reinvented itself again and again.⁷⁴

72. See, for example, the review articles on Parpola's *Assyrian Prophecies* by J.S. Cooper, 'Assyrian Prophecies, the Assyrian Tree, and the Mesopotamian Origins of Jewish Monotheism, Greek Philosophy, Christian Theology, Gnosticism, and Much More', *JAOS* 120 (2000), pp. 430-44, E. Frahm, 'Wie "christlich" war die assyrische Religion?', *WdO* 31 (2000-2001), pp. 31-45, and Manfred Weippert, '"König, fürchte dich nicht!" Assyrische Prophetie im 7. Jahrhundert v. Chr.', *Or* 71 (2002), pp. 1-54. Among those who believe that Parpola is right is Ithamar Gruenwald; see his '"How Much Qabbalah in Ancient Assyria?"—Methodological Reflections on the Study of a Cross-Cultural Phenomenon', in *Assyria 1995: Proceedings of the 10th Anniversary Symposium of the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, Helsinki, September 7-11, 1995* (ed. S. Parpola and R.M. Whiting; Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1997), pp. 115-27.

73. Among the many important topics not addressed in this paper is the question of how different scholars have assessed the impact that Babylonian culture had on Assyrian civilization.

74. It is noteworthy, though, that the mercantile spirit of the beginnings seems never to have disappeared completely. As recently shown again by Karen Radner, 'Traders in the Neo-Assyrian Period', in *Trade and Finance in Ancient Mesopotamia: Proceedings of the First MOS Symposium (Leiden 1997)* (ed. J.G. Dercksen; PIHANS, 84; Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut te Istanbul, 1999), pp. 101-26 (with earlier literature), Assyrian merchants continued to play a prominent economic role during the first millennium, complementing the 'tributary mode of production' that otherwise dominated the age of Assyrian imperialism with trade connections based on exchange. This mercantile spirit may help to explain why Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions sometimes display a care reminiscent of a diligent accountant's bookkeep-

At times, it is the nature of the practice of history to reduce cultural complexity. But historians also have to question the myth of cultural homogeneity. Both on the synchronic and on the diachronic level, every civilization, Assyria included, is characterized by a number of inherent contradictions. The present author has the impression that recent scholarship has focused too much on the cultural achievements of Assyria, and too little on the dark side of this remarkable state.⁷⁵ Few will deny any more that the sculptures from Nineveh and other Assyrian capitals have impressive aesthetic qualities,⁷⁶ and nobody will question that the Assyrians, by creating their provincial system, implemented a political order that had a great future. But we should not forget, in our late discovery of the beauty of the artwork and our admiration for the administrative skills of the Assyrians, that their rulers, in order to achieve their goals—even apparently noble goals such as establishing unity and order—, waged extremely aggressive wars, deported whole populations from one end of their realm to the other, and killed large numbers of civilians.⁷⁷

ing when they inventory the numbers of killed, maimed or deported enemies and indicate the amounts of booty and tribute delivered to the king (see Marco De Odorico, *The Use of Numbers and Quantifications in the Assyrian Royal Inscriptions* [SAAS, 3; Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1995], pp. 8-12 and *passim*). Pictorial representations of the atrocities the imperial Assyrian armies committed during their campaigns in the Neo-Assyrian period seem to be imbued with such a bookkeeping spirit as well: several palace reliefs show images of scribes carefully counting severed enemy heads (see, for example, WA 124945, from the palace of Assurbanipal in Nineveh, reproduced on the cover of F.M. Fales and J.N. Postgate, *Imperial Administrative Records, Part II* [SAA, 11; Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1995]). Even the Bible is aware of the commercial ambitions of the Assyrians; it mentions Assyrian merchants in Ezek. 27.23. If Karl Marx had known more about the history of the ancient Near East, he would probably have looked with great interest at the close relationship that existed in Assyria between capitalism and imperialism.

75. Even a work like Mayer's *Politik und Kriegskunst der Assyrier* is no exception; its title, with its characterization of the Assyrian war strategy as an art, implies a certain degree of esteem, on the part of the author, for the military machine of Assyria.

76. Although it needs to be said that quite a number of distinguished students of ancient Near Eastern art from the second half of the twentieth century have provided rather critical assessments of the Assyrian artistic record. André Parrot, for example, has claimed that Assyrian art never moves us, presents us with lifeless stereotypes, and lacks the expressive variety necessary to produce a powerful emotional response in the spectator (*Nineveh and Babylon* [trans. Stuart Gilbert and James Emmons; The Arts of Mankind, 2; London: Thames & Hudson, 1991], pp. 12-13). For similarly negative statements on Assyrian art by scholars such as Richard D. Barnett, Eva Strommenger, and H.W.F. Saggs, see Leo Bersani and Ulysses Dutoit, *The Forms of Violence: Narrative in Assyrian Art and Modern Culture* (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), pp. 6-7. For a more appreciative view, see, for example, John Malcolm Russell, 'Bulls for the Palace and Order in the Empire: The Sculptural Program of Sennacherib's Court VI at Nineveh', *ArtB* 69 (1987), pp. 520-39.

77. It goes without saying that other ancient nations, both in the East and in the West, behaved brutally as well, and that even the Bible, as recently shown by John J. Collins ('The Zeal of

When the Assyrian king Esarhaddon reports that he raged 'like an angry whirlwind' to destroy his enemies⁷⁸ and presents himself as a ruler who can claim: 'Before him, cities; behind him, ruins',⁷⁹ he does not appear much like 'a saviour king who...restored the cosmic harmony', as a modern scholar has recently characterized him.⁸⁰ On the contrary, Esarhaddon projects an image of a violent storm reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's famous description of Paul Klee's painting 'Angelus novus.' That painting, Benjamin writes,

shows...the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling up wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.⁸¹

Phineas: The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence', *JBL* 122 [2003], pp. 3-21), indulges repeatedly in the celebration of the killing of enemy civilians and other brutal acts. The degree to which the Assyrians were fixated on violence, in deeds, words, and images, seems, however, unparalleled.

78. *kīma ezzi tīb meḥī ina birtšunu* [azīq], see R. Borger, *Die Inschriften Asarhaddons, Königs von Assyrien* (AfOB, 9; Graz: im Selbstverlage des Herausgebers, 1956), p. 65, §28 Nin. E. ii 18. On the ubiquity of the wind metaphor in Assyrian royal inscriptions, see Albert Schott, *Die Vergleiche in den akkadischen Königsinschriften* (MVAG, 30; Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1925), pp. 83-85.

79. *pānuššu ālumma arkēšu tīlu*, see Borger, *Inschriften Asarhaddons*, p. 97, §65 Mnm. A. rev. 13 (the correct reading of this passage was established by B. Landsberger, 'Einige unerkannt gebliebene oder verkannte Nomina des Akkadischen', *WZKM* 57 [1961], pp. 1-23 [2 n. 8]).

80. Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies*, p. xlv.

81.

Es gibt ein Bild von Klee, das Angelus Novus heißt. Ein Engel ist darauf dargestellt, der aussieht, als wäre er im Begriff, sich von etwas zu entfernen, worauf er starrt. Seine Augen sind aufgerissen, sein Mund steht offen und seine Flügel sind ausgespannt. Der Engel der Geschichte muß so aussehen. Er hat das Antlitz der Vergangenheit zugewendet. Wo eine Kette von Begebenheiten vor uns erscheint, da sieht er eine einzige Katastrophe, die unablässig Trümmer auf Trümmer häuft und sie ihm vor die Füße schleudert. Er möchte wohl verweilen, die Toten wecken und das Zerschlagene zusammenfügen. Aber ein Sturm weht vom Paradiese her, der sich in seinen Flügeln verfangen hat und so stark ist, daß der Engel sie nicht mehr schließen kann. Dieser Sturm treibt ihn unaufhaltsam in die Zukunft, der er den Rücken kehrt, während der Trümmerhaufen vor ihm zum Himmel wächst. Das, was wir den Fortschritt nennen, ist dieser Sturm.

Walter Benjamin, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* IX, in *Gesammelte Schriften* (7 vols.; ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser; Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1972-89), I/2, pp. 697-98.

The Assyrians, who started their expansion from their capitals on the Tigris, one of the four rivers of the biblical Eden, represent Benjamin's storm well. Their empire indeed brought 'progress', but the price was a vast mountain of debris in its wake—cities devastated, lives destroyed, cultures derailed—almost as high as the wrecked remains before Benjamin's 'angel of history.'